

**Optimizing English Language Learning at the BIF Foundation  
Special Needs School through the Merdeka Curriculum**

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**Abstract** The implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* has introduced greater flexibility and autonomy in instructional practices, including in special education contexts. This study aims to examine how the *Merdeka Curriculum* is implemented in English language instruction at *Sekolah Luar Biasa (SLB)* under the Bina Insani Firaas Foundation in Mojokerto, East Java. Using a qualitative descriptive research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis involving English teachers, school principals, and a foundation leader. The findings indicate that curriculum flexibility enables teachers to adapt English instruction to students' diverse learning needs by simplifying materials, adjusting learning pace, and employing visual, multimodal, and experiential teaching strategies. These practices support student engagement, participation, and confidence in English learning activities. However, the study also identifies challenges related to limited inclusive learning materials, insufficient access to assistive technology, and a lack of targeted professional development for English teachers in *SLB* settings. Institutional support and

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teacher collaboration emerge as important factors that facilitate the implementation of inclusive English language instruction. This study highlights that the *Merdeka Curriculum* holds strong potential to support inclusive English language teaching when accompanied by adequate resources, professional support, and collaborative efforts among educational stakeholders. The findings contribute empirical insights into curriculum implementation in special education contexts and offer practical implications for the development of inclusive English language teaching practices.

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## INTRODUCTION

Education is universally recognized as a fundamental human right, ensuring every individual, regardless of physical, intellectual, or emotional differences, has the opportunity to grow and contribute to society (UNESCO, 2017). In Indonesia, Special Needs Schools (*Sekolah Luar Biasa* or SLB) play a strategic role in delivering equitable access to education for students with disabilities. These institutions provide targeted pedagogical support to learners with physical, intellectual, sensory, or multiple impairments. Within this context, English language instruction becomes a critical subject, serving not only as a means of global communication but also as a tool for social inclusion, cognitive development, and empowerment in a globalized world.

In recent years, the Indonesian government has launched the *Kurikulum Merdeka* (Independent Curriculum), which reflects the national shift toward student-centered learning and inclusive education. Inspired by the philosophy of *Merdeka Belajar* or “Freedom to Learn,” the curriculum emphasizes flexibility, learner autonomy, and differentiation, enabling teachers to tailor their instructional approaches to meet the diverse needs of learners (Widodo, 2020). This curriculum aligns with broader global movements promoting inclusive education as a means to

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address disparities and ensure that all students, including those with special needs, can learn meaningfully within educational structures (Booth & Ainscow, 2002).

Despite its inclusive aims, the implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* in SLBs particularly in English language teaching faces substantial challenges. These challenges include limited infrastructure, insufficient teacher preparedness in adaptive pedagogy, shortages of appropriate learning materials, and the wide spectrum of student needs. Studies in Indonesian special education contexts indicate that curriculum reform often requires gradual adjustment, especially in English instruction, due to varying levels of teacher readiness and institutional support (Rosadi, 2023). Moreover, inclusive education literature emphasizes that effective learning depends on the adaptation of instructional strategies to accommodate diverse learners through differentiated instruction and inclusive learning design (Hall, Strangman, & Meyer, 2003).

Previous studies on inclusive education have predominantly focused on mainstream school settings or general pedagogical frameworks. Research by Slee and Allan (2001) and Ruys, et.al (2010) highlights the importance of inclusive pedagogy and collaborative learning environments; however, these studies provide limited discussion of subject-specific instruction for students with disabilities. In the field of English language education, empirical studies addressing inclusive practices in special school contexts remain relatively limited. Consequently, there is still insufficient understanding of how English language instruction is adapted and implemented for students with special needs within the framework of national curriculum reform. Based on these considerations, the research gap addressed in this study lies in the limited empirical evidence on how the *Kurikulum Merdeka* is enacted in English language instruction in SLB contexts. In particular, existing studies have not adequately explored how teachers interpret curriculum flexibility, adapt instructional strategies, and respond to contextual challenges when teaching English to students with diverse special needs.

Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to examine the implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* in English language instruction at two Special Needs

Schools under the Bina Insani Firaas Foundation (BIF) in Mojokerto, East Java. Specifically, this study aims to explore how English teachers interpret and enact curriculum flexibility in their classroom practices, identify instructional strategies used to accommodate students with diverse learning needs, and examine the challenges encountered in implementing inclusive English language teaching. In addition, this study aims to identify institutional and contextual factors that support or hinder the implementation of inclusive English instruction within *SLB* settings. Through these objectives, the study is expected to provide empirical insights that contribute to the development of inclusive English language teaching practices and inform curriculum implementation in special education contexts.

The novelty of this study lies in three dimensions. First, it provides a subject-specific contribution by focusing on English instruction, rather than inclusive education in general. Second, it offers a context-sensitive analysis, rooted in the realities of *SLB* classrooms in Mojokerto, where teachers and students navigate the complexities of limited resources and diverse learning needs. Third, it bridges global and local perspectives, integrating international theories of inclusive pedagogy (e.g., constructivism, differentiated instruction, cooperative learning, and UDL) with empirical evidence from *SLB* practice in Indonesia. By situating the study at this intersection, it contributes both to the scholarly discourse on inclusive English education and to the practical development of strategies that can be replicated in similar contexts.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Theoretical Perspectives on Inclusive Education**

Inclusive education has become a central concern in contemporary educational discourse as it emphasizes the right of all learners to access meaningful and equitable learning opportunities regardless of their physical, cognitive, or emotional conditions. This approach moves away from deficit-based views of disability and instead promotes diversity as a natural and valuable aspect of the

learning environment. Inclusive education highlights participation, equity, and responsiveness to individual differences as fundamental principles of quality education (UNESCO, 2017).

One of the most influential theoretical frameworks in inclusive education is proposed by Booth and Ainscow (2002), who conceptualize inclusion as a continuous process of increasing participation in learning, school culture, and community life while reducing exclusion. Their Index for Inclusion provides practical guidance for schools in identifying barriers to learning and developing inclusive policies and practices. Inclusion, in this sense, extends beyond physical access to classrooms and encompasses curriculum design, instructional strategies, assessment methods, and social interaction. This framework is particularly relevant for special education contexts such as *Sekolah Luar Biasa (SLB)*, where learners present diverse and complex needs.

Inclusive pedagogy further develops this perspective by emphasizing instructional planning that anticipates learner diversity rather than reacting to it. Florian and Spratt (2023) argue that inclusive pedagogy requires teachers to design learning experiences that support all students without marginalizing those who require additional assistance. This approach challenges teachers to reconsider traditional teaching practices and adopt flexible strategies that allow multiple pathways to learning. In English language teaching, inclusive pedagogy encourages the use of varied instructional methods, flexible pacing, and alternative forms of expression to accommodate diverse learners.

Differentiated instruction is widely recognized as a practical strategy for implementing inclusive education in classrooms. Tomlinson (2017) defines differentiation as the deliberate adaptation of content, learning processes, and learning outcomes based on students' readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles. In special education settings, differentiated instruction allows English teachers to adjust language input, simplify tasks, and provide individualized support without lowering learning expectations. This approach acknowledges that students

learn in different ways and at different rates, especially in classrooms that include learners with cognitive, sensory, or communicative challenges.

Cooperative learning also plays an important role in inclusive classrooms by fostering interaction, collaboration, and mutual support among students. Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (2014) emphasize that cooperative learning promotes positive interdependence, individual accountability, and social skill development. Drawing on Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, cooperative learning enables students to develop language skills through guided interaction with peers. In inclusive English classrooms, peer-assisted learning can reduce anxiety, increase participation, and support both academic and social development.

The integration of assistive technology and multimodal instruction further strengthens inclusive teaching practices. Green and Blum (2019) highlight that visual aids, speech-to-text applications, audio-visual materials, and interactive digital tools can significantly enhance accessibility for students with physical, sensory, or cognitive impairments. Papadakis (2021) similarly notes that digital learning platforms offer flexible learning environments that support communication and engagement through multiple modes of representation. In English language learning, the use of multimodal resources allows students to construct meaning through sound, text, images, and movement, which is particularly beneficial for learners with special needs.

Inclusive education also emphasizes collaborative practices and shared responsibility among educators in addressing learner diversity. Research suggests that inclusive schooling requires systematic cooperation, flexible instructional planning, and strong professional collaboration to ensure meaningful participation for students with diverse learning needs (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006; Loreman, Deppeler, & Harvey, 2010). In special education contexts, effective collaboration between teachers and support staff plays a crucial role in adapting instruction and supporting students with disabilities (Friend & Bursuck, 2019; Gargiulo & Metcalf, 2017).

### **Inclusive English Language Teaching in Special Education**

English language teaching in special education contexts requires instructional approaches that are sensitive to learners' cognitive, emotional, and social characteristics. Unlike mainstream classrooms, *SLB* settings often involve students with varied communication abilities, learning styles, and attention spans. As a result, English instruction must prioritize functional communication, engagement, and confidence building alongside linguistic competence.

Research on inclusive English language teaching suggests that effective instruction emphasizes meaningful communication rather than formal language accuracy alone. Learner-centered strategies such as role-playing, storytelling, songs, and games are frequently used to support vocabulary acquisition and basic communicative skills. These activities help students associate language learning with real-life contexts and enjoyable experiences, thereby increasing motivation and participation.

The use of visual and concrete materials has been shown to be particularly effective in special education English classrooms. Flashcards, pictograms, real objects, and color-coded charts help students understand vocabulary and sentence structures more easily. Such strategies align with differentiated instruction principles and support learners who struggle with abstract language concepts. Studies in English language teaching also indicate that multimodal input enhances comprehension and retention, especially for students with learning difficulties.

Recent studies published in *LET: Linguistics, Literature and English Teaching Journal* further emphasize the importance of instructional strategies and media in English language learning. Saadillah and Hidayah (2017) found that the use of learning strategies contributes significantly to students' engagement and awareness in English learning processes. Similarly, Zulfia and Andini (2023) reported that well-designed educational videos can enhance vocabulary learning by providing visual and auditory support that increases learner engagement. These findings are relevant to inclusive English instruction, as they highlight how appropriate strategies and media can support diverse learners.

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Technology integration also plays an increasingly important role in English language teaching for students with special needs. Digital applications, simple educational videos, and interactive platforms can provide additional support for learners who require repeated exposure and flexible learning pace. However, the effectiveness of technology depends on teachers' ability to adapt digital tools to students' specific needs and the availability of adequate infrastructure.

### **Inclusive Education and *Merdeka Curriculum* in the Indonesian Context**

In Indonesia, inclusive education has gained greater attention following curriculum reforms aimed at promoting equity and learner-centered education. The introduction of the *Merdeka Curriculum* reflects a national effort to provide greater flexibility in curriculum implementation and empower teachers to adapt learning to students' individual needs. Widodo (2020) explains that the philosophy of *Merdeka Belajar* emphasizes autonomy, contextual learning, and meaningful learning experiences, which align closely with inclusive education principles.

Despite its inclusive orientation, the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* in *Sekolah Luar Biasa* continues to face significant challenges. Empirical studies indicate that limited infrastructure, insufficient teacher preparation in inclusive pedagogy, and shortages of appropriate learning materials remain persistent issues in special education settings (Rosadi, 2023). These challenges are particularly evident in English language instruction, where teachers must simultaneously address language objectives and diverse learner needs.

Several Indonesian studies have examined inclusive education practices across different educational levels. Junanto and Kusna (2018) reported limitations in teacher readiness and instructional planning in inclusive early childhood education programs. Wijayanti, Liftiah, and Budiyo (2025) similarly found that while inclusive practices are increasingly adopted in elementary schools, challenges related to resources and professional competence remain. Although these studies provide valuable insights, most focus on general inclusive practices rather than subject-specific instruction.



Research specifically addressing English language teaching in *SLB* contexts remains limited. Rosadi (2023) examined the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* in *SLBN* 1 Kota Bima and identified teacher readiness and material availability as major obstacles in English instruction. However, detailed exploration of classroom strategies and teacher adaptation processes is still scarce. This indicates a need for studies that examine how teachers interpret curriculum flexibility and translate it into inclusive English teaching practices within *SLB* classrooms.

Overall, existing literature in Indonesia highlights the growing commitment to inclusive education while also revealing gaps in subject-specific research and practical implementation. There is limited empirical evidence that captures teachers' lived experiences in adapting English language instruction to diverse learner needs under the *Merdeka Curriculum*. Addressing this gap requires research that integrates theoretical perspectives with classroom realities and provides practical insights for educators and policymakers.

## METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* in English language instruction at special needs schools under the Bina Insani Firaas Foundation in Mojokerto, East Java. A qualitative approach was selected because it allows for an in-depth understanding of educational practices, teacher perspectives, and contextual factors that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods (Creswell, 2014). This design was particularly appropriate for examining inclusive English language teaching in *Sekolah Luar Biasa (SLB)*, where learning processes are shaped by diverse student needs and institutional conditions.

The research was conducted at two *SLBs* managed by the Bina Insani Firaas Foundation, namely Thumb Kids School located in Mojokerto City and Golden Kids School located in Mojokerto Regency, East Java. These schools were selected purposively because they had actively implemented the *Merdeka Curriculum* and served students with various types of disabilities.

Participants in this study consisted of five individuals who were directly involved in the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum*. They included two English teachers, two school principals, and one foundation leader. All teacher participants were female and had teaching experience in special education ranging from approximately five to twelve years. The principals had more than ten years of experience in managing special education institutions, while the foundation leader provided broader institutional perspectives related to curriculum policy, resource allocation, and professional support. Participants were selected purposively based on their roles and direct engagement in English language instruction and curriculum implementation.

Data were collected using three main techniques: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants to gain insight into their experiences, perceptions, and challenges related to the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* in English language teaching. The interviews focused on instructional strategies, curriculum adaptation, resource availability, and institutional support. Classroom observations were carried out to capture real-time teaching practices and student engagement during English lessons. The observations focused on instructional methods, teacher-student interaction, use of learning media, and student responses to learning activities. Field notes were taken systematically to document observed practices and classroom dynamics.

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process began with data familiarization through repeated reading of interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents. Initial codes were then generated to identify meaningful units related to inclusive instruction, curriculum flexibility, teaching strategies, and implementation challenges. These codes were subsequently grouped into broader themes that reflected recurring patterns across the data.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, data triangulation was applied by comparing information obtained from interviews, observations, and document

analysis. Member checking was also conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with participants to ensure the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations. Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research process, including informed consent, participant anonymity, and confidentiality (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

This section presents and discusses the findings of the study by integrating empirical evidence from interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis with relevant theoretical perspectives. The discussion is organized thematically to illustrate how the *Merdeka Curriculum* is implemented in English language instruction at *Sekolah Luar Biasa (SLB)* under the Bina Insani Firaas Foundation, as well as the challenges and opportunities that emerge in practice.

### **Curriculum Flexibility in Inclusive English Language Instruction**

One of the most significant findings of this study is the role of curriculum flexibility in supporting inclusive English language instruction. Teachers perceived the *Merdeka Curriculum* as providing greater autonomy compared to previous curricula, allowing them to adapt learning objectives, materials, and teaching pace according to students' abilities and learning conditions. This flexibility was considered particularly important in *SLB* contexts, where students demonstrate diverse cognitive, communicative, and behavioral characteristics.

An English teacher explained that instructional materials could not be used uniformly, stating, *"I cannot use the textbook directly because each student has different abilities. I usually simplify the material and focus on what they can understand."* This perception was also evident in lesson plan documents, which showed modifications in learning targets and activities based on students' developmental levels. Classroom observations further confirmed that teachers frequently adjusted instructional strategies during lessons, especially when students showed signs of confusion or disengagement.

These findings align with the principles of inclusive pedagogy, which emphasize responsiveness to learner diversity and the removal of barriers to learning (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). The flexibility promoted by the *Merdeka Curriculum* enables teachers to enact differentiated instruction in practice, as suggested by Tomlinson (2017), by modifying content and learning processes without lowering expectations. In this sense, curriculum flexibility functions as a key enabler of inclusive English language teaching in *SLB* classrooms.

### **Multimodal and Experiential Teaching Strategies**

Another prominent finding relates to the instructional strategies employed by teachers to facilitate English language learning. Teachers consistently relied on visual, multimodal, and experiential learning strategies to support students' comprehension and engagement. Commonly observed practices included the use of flashcards, pictograms, real objects, songs, body movements, and simple role-playing activities.

One teacher highlighted the importance of visual support by stating, "*If I only explain verbally, the students lose focus. Pictures and movements help them understand faster.*" Classroom observations showed that students were more attentive and responsive when vocabulary was introduced through visual aids or physical demonstrations. Experiential activities such as singing and role-playing were particularly effective in encouraging student participation and reducing anxiety during English lessons.

These practices reflect the principles of differentiated instruction and cooperative learning, which emphasize active engagement and social interaction (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 2014). From a theoretical perspective, such strategies are consistent with Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, where learning occurs through guided interaction and meaningful social experiences. The use of multimodal resources also supports inclusive pedagogy by offering multiple pathways for students to access and express meaning (Papadakis, 2021; Green & Blum, 2019).

In addition, these findings resonate with previous studies published in LET: Linguistics, Literature and English Teaching Journal, which highlight the role of instructional strategies and media in enhancing English language learning. Saadillah and Hidayah (2017) emphasize that effective learning strategies contribute to students' engagement and awareness in English learning processes, while Zulfia and Andini (2023) demonstrate that well-designed educational videos can enhance vocabulary learning through visual and auditory support. Although digital resources were limited in the observed *SLB* settings, the pedagogical principles underlying these studies were reflected in teachers' use of simple, non-digital multimodal materials.

### **Resource Constraints and Professional Development Challenges**

Despite the positive impact of curriculum flexibility and adaptive teaching strategies, this study identified several challenges that constrained the optimal implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum*. A major issue reported by teachers was the limited availability of English learning materials designed specifically for students with disabilities. Most available textbooks were intended for mainstream learners and were not suitable for *SLB* contexts.

One participant noted, *"We have to create our own materials because the books are not suitable. It takes a lot of time, and not all teachers know how to design materials for special needs students."* Document analysis revealed that teachers relied heavily on self-developed worksheets, flashcards, and improvised teaching aids, indicating both creativity and resource limitations.

Another recurring challenge was the lack of targeted professional development related to inclusive English language teaching. Although teachers had participated in general training on curriculum reform, they felt that such training did not adequately address the specific demands of teaching English in *SLB* settings. As one teacher explained, *"We mostly learn from experience and from other teachers. There is no specific training for teaching English in SLB."*

These findings support previous research indicating that teacher preparedness is a critical factor in the success of inclusive education initiatives (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2019). Without sustained and context-specific professional development, teachers are often required to navigate curriculum implementation through trial and error, which may affect instructional consistency and teacher well-being.

### **Institutional Support and Emerging Opportunities for Inclusive Practice**

Despite existing challenges, the findings also reveal several opportunities that support inclusive English language instruction. Institutional support from school leadership and the foundation emerged as an important enabling factor. School principals encouraged teachers to experiment with instructional strategies and supported collaborative practices among staff.

One school leader stated, “*We encourage teachers to be creative and not afraid to try new methods, as long as it helps the students learn.*” Informal peer mentoring was observed, with experienced teachers sharing teaching ideas and classroom management strategies with their colleagues. This collaborative culture reflects Stenhouse’s (1983) concept of the teacher as a reflective practitioner who continuously adapts practice based on classroom realities.

Parental involvement also contributed to student learning, although its level varied. Some parents actively supported their children’s English learning at home by practicing vocabulary and simple expressions, while others were less involved due to time constraints or limited familiarity with English. Teachers acknowledged that stronger parent-school collaboration could further enhance learning outcomes.

Overall, student responses to English instruction under the *Merdeka Curriculum* were largely positive. Classroom observations indicated increased participation, enthusiasm, and spontaneous use of basic English expressions. Teachers reported that students began using English greetings in daily routines, suggesting that English learning had become meaningful and integrated into students’ social experiences. This finding reinforces the view that inclusive

education is not merely about access, but about meaningful participation and achievement (UNESCO, 2017).

### **Strengthening Inclusive English Instruction through Collaborative and Contextual Practices**

In addition to instructional strategies applied in the classroom, the findings of this study highlight the importance of collaborative and contextual practices in strengthening inclusive English language instruction in *SLB* settings. Teachers emphasized that inclusive teaching could not rely solely on individual effort, but required continuous coordination among teachers, school leaders, and the foundation. Collaboration among English teachers and classroom teachers was particularly important in understanding students' learning characteristics, behavioral patterns, and communication needs. Through informal discussions and shared planning, teachers were able to align instructional goals and adapt learning activities more effectively.

Classroom observations revealed that collaborative practices supported more consistent learning experiences for students. For example, teachers often discussed students' responses to English lessons and shared strategies that worked well for particular learners. This exchange of practical knowledge helped teachers refine their instructional approaches and avoid repetitive trial-and-error processes. Such collaboration also contributed to a supportive professional environment in which teachers felt encouraged to experiment with adaptive strategies without fear of failure. In this sense, collaboration functioned as a practical mechanism for sustaining inclusive practices within the school context.

The findings also indicate that contextual understanding of students' backgrounds played a significant role in shaping English language instruction. Teachers considered students' daily routines, family involvement, and prior learning experiences when designing learning activities. English lessons were often connected to familiar objects, daily activities, and simple social interactions to make learning more meaningful for students. This contextualization helped students relate English language input to their real-life experiences, thereby increasing engagement

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and comprehension. Such practices demonstrate that inclusive English instruction is most effective when learning materials and activities are grounded in students' immediate environments.

Parental involvement emerged as another contextual factor that influenced English language learning. Although the level of parental support varied, teachers reported that students whose parents reinforced simple English vocabulary and expressions at home showed greater confidence in classroom activities. Teachers acknowledged that not all parents were able to provide consistent support due to time constraints or limited familiarity with English. Nevertheless, simple communication between teachers and parents, such as sharing learning objectives or basic practice activities, was viewed as beneficial in supporting students' learning continuity.

Furthermore, institutional support from school leadership and the foundation contributed to the sustainability of inclusive English instruction. School leaders provided flexibility in lesson planning and encouraged teachers to prioritize students' learning needs over rigid curriculum targets. This support allowed teachers to adjust instructional pacing and content without pressure to complete standardized materials. Teachers perceived such institutional flexibility as essential in maintaining inclusive practices, particularly when working with students who required repeated instruction and individualized attention.

Overall, these findings suggest that inclusive English language teaching in *SLB* contexts is shaped by a combination of instructional adaptation, collaboration, and contextual awareness. While classroom strategies remain central, inclusive practices are strengthened when supported by collaborative teacher cultures, parental engagement, and flexible institutional policies. These factors work together to create learning environments that are responsive to students' diverse needs and capable of sustaining inclusive English language instruction over time.



### **Implications for Inclusive English Language Teaching in *SLB* Contexts**

The findings of this study have several important implications for inclusive English language teaching in special education contexts, particularly within the framework of the *Merdeka Curriculum*. First, the emphasis on curriculum flexibility highlights the need to reconceptualize English learning objectives in *SLB* classrooms. Rather than prioritizing linguistic accuracy or completion of prescribed content, English instruction for students with special needs should focus on functional communication, participation, and confidence building. This shift in focus aligns with inclusive education principles that view learning success as meaningful engagement rather than standardized achievement.

Second, the adaptive instructional strategies observed in this study suggest that inclusive English language teaching requires teachers to function as reflective practitioners. Teachers continuously interpret students' responses and adjust instruction accordingly, demonstrating professional judgment and pedagogical creativity. This finding underscores the importance of teacher autonomy in curriculum implementation, as rigid instructional guidelines may limit teachers' ability to respond to students' immediate learning needs. Within the *Merdeka Curriculum* framework, such autonomy should be supported through institutional policies and leadership practices that encourage experimentation and reflective teaching.

Third, the reliance on visual, multimodal, and experiential learning strategies indicates that inclusive English instruction benefits from approaches that engage multiple senses and learning modalities. For students with special needs, learning through movement, images, and concrete experiences provides meaningful access to language input that may otherwise be inaccessible through verbal explanation alone. These strategies also support social interaction and collaborative learning, which are essential components of inclusive education. As such, instructional design in *SLB* contexts should intentionally integrate multimodal resources, even when technological tools are limited.

Fourth, the challenges related to limited resources and professional development point to the need for systemic support beyond individual teacher efforts. While teachers demonstrated resilience and creativity in adapting English instruction, sustainable inclusive practices require institutional investment in appropriate learning materials, assistive technologies, and continuous professional learning. Professional development programs should be tailored to the specific needs of English teachers in *SLB* settings, focusing on practical strategies for differentiation, inclusive assessment, and curriculum adaptation rather than generic curriculum orientation.

Finally, the findings suggest that inclusive English language teaching is a collaborative endeavor that extends beyond the classroom. Institutional leadership, peer collaboration among teachers, and parental involvement play crucial roles in shaping learning experiences for students with special needs. Strengthening collaboration among these stakeholders can enhance instructional consistency and provide students with more coherent learning support. In this regard, inclusive education should be viewed not only as a pedagogical approach but also as a shared responsibility among schools, families, and educational institutions.

In addition, the findings of this study suggest that inclusive English language teaching should be viewed as an ongoing and evolving practice rather than a fixed instructional model. Teachers' adaptive responses to students' needs indicate that curriculum implementation is a dynamic process shaped by continuous reflection, interaction, and contextual adjustment. Recognizing this dynamic nature is essential for sustaining inclusive practices in special education settings, particularly as curriculum reforms continue to evolve over time

## CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This study examined the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* in English language instruction at *Sekolah Luar Biasa* under the Bina Insani Firaas Foundation in Mojokerto, East Java. The findings indicate that the *Merdeka*

*Curriculum* provides meaningful flexibility that allows English teachers to adapt instructional practices to the diverse learning needs of students with special needs. Curriculum flexibility enables teachers to simplify materials, adjust learning pace, and select teaching strategies that are more responsive to students' abilities and classroom conditions.

The study found that English teachers employed various adaptive strategies, including visual, multimodal, and experiential approaches, to support student engagement and participation. The use of flashcards, pictograms, songs, body movements, and simple role-playing activities helped students understand English vocabulary and expressions more effectively. These strategies contributed to increased student confidence and more active participation in English learning activities. However, the implementation of inclusive English instruction also faced several challenges, particularly the limited availability of learning materials designed for students with disabilities, insufficient access to assistive technology, and the lack of targeted professional development for English teachers in *SLB* settings.

Based on these findings, several suggestions can be proposed. First, schools and educational foundations should support the development and provision of English learning materials that are specifically designed for students with special needs. Such materials should emphasize visual, concrete, and experiential elements that align with students' learning characteristics. Second, continuous and context-specific professional development programs are needed to strengthen teachers' capacity in implementing inclusive English language instruction. Training activities should focus on practical strategies for adapting materials, managing diverse classrooms, and supporting functional English communication.

Third, institutional support should be strengthened by encouraging collaboration among teachers, school leaders, and parents. Teacher collaboration can facilitate the sharing of instructional strategies and classroom experiences, while parental involvement can help reinforce English learning beyond the classroom. Finally, future research is recommended to involve a wider range of *SLB* contexts

and regions in order to provide broader insights into the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* in special education. Longitudinal studies may also offer a deeper understanding of the long-term impact of inclusive English language instruction on students' communication skills and learning development.

In addition, future studies may explore the perspectives of students and parents to gain a more comprehensive understanding of inclusive English language learning experiences in *SLB* contexts. Examining classroom practices across different types of disabilities and institutional settings may also provide more nuanced insights into how curriculum flexibility is enacted in diverse special education environments.

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